

**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
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ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

**MOGAN CULTURAL CENTER
LOWELL NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
KHMER ORAL HISTORY PROJECT II**

**INFORMANT: SOVANN-THIDA LOEUNG [CAMBODIA]
INTERVIEWER: MEHMED ALI
DATE: JANUARY 22, 2006**

**A = ALI
T = THIDA**

Tape 06.02

A: This is interview with Sovann-Thida Loeung on January 22, 2006. Thida, first a little bit of background information. Where and when were you born?

T: I was born in Cambodia in 1964.

A: And where exactly in Cambodia?

T: In Phnom Penh, the capitol city of Cambodia there. But I moved to live in a little Province called Thmar Puok. That is north, northwest, (A: Okay) near the Thai border.

A: Okay. And do you know what neighborhood you were born in, in Phnom Penh?

T: I don't know. (A: Okay) We moved out very early and I was young.

A: So you have no memories of Phnom Penh as a child?

T: I have no memory at all.

A: Now you went to school when you were young?

T: I went to school when I was very young. I was probably around six, seven years old in the Province that we moved to from Phnom Penh.

A: Any recollections about school during that time period?

T: Yes. The school was very old and shabby, built of wood and straw, and just dirt floor. Long buildings like billets. (A: Okay) Just rows and rows with big field in the middle. Some gardens, bushes in front of the school, and next to the school is a big market for the Province.

A: Oh okay.

T: Yah, it's like open-air market.

A: And did you, did you live in the main town or city in the Province?

T: No, Thmar Puok is a very small town, and we lived in a town it just was very small. It's like countryside in our country, you know, place here in the United States. There were not a lot of tall buildings, or it's very small and country-like kind of life.

A: Was there a name for your particular village?

T: It's called Thmar Puok.

A: Thmar Puok. And what's (--) And that's the same name as the Province?

T: Well the Province is for that is called Battambang. (A: Okay) Battambang is you know a very big city. Thmar Puok is a very small village kind of life.

A: And why did your folks move from Phnom Penh over to there?

T: My, as I remember, my father was selected to be the principal at Thmur Puok, then was elementary school.

A: Okay. So you saw your dad at school everyday?

T: At school everyday. He was very well respected. And I was so proud of myself to be the principal of the school's daughter in there. Yah, it was a very happy childhood.

A: Tell us a little bit about your parents.

T: Well my father was the principal of the school. Everyday that's what he's doing. He went to school and just in charge of the school. I don't know much about that, but I only remember that. He was also teaching music and dance. (A: Okay) Yah, mostly for dance. Not much of classical.

A: And how did he learn that?

T: I don't know. I never knew about it.

A: Okay. And your mom?

T: My mom was a homemaker. She stayed home looking after my you know, children, my brothers and sisters. And she also cooked dessert, and sold desserts in a market next to the school. So every time I was in school, and on my break I usually go to her and have, you know, had snack there. A wonderful time.

A: Now did you know your grandparents?

T: I do not know my grandparents at all, both side of my grandparents, my father's and my mother's. I had no memory at all.

A: No memory, and you don't even know their names?

T: Not at all. I just remember this little part of my childhood, my mother's side, anyway, my grandparents. I went to visit them and play a little bit, and that's it.

A: And where were they located?

T: Um, my mother's, they were in Kompong Chhnang, a little Province there. And I think that my father's were in Phnom Penh.

A: Okay. And do you know anything else about your family history?

T: Not much.

A: Do you have any [Chin] in your family?

T: My father's I think, my ancestors.

A: Were they [Chin] Khmer, or just part?

T: My mother's I think are just Khmer, but my father was I think Chinese ancestors.

A: Okay. So how many members in your family?

T: I have three brothers and three sisters. (A: Okay) I'm the second one in the family.

A: Okay. And what did you do for fun when you were a child?

T: I took care of my brothers and my sisters. I made sure that they don't cry. I made sure that they you know, well fed. And just like big sister, like a babysitter to my siblings. And in the morning I helped my mother. Got up very early, five or six in the morning, helped her make the dessert. (A: Wow) Yah, it was a routine to me and I had no complaint about it. I enjoyed it I remember. And then at seven o'clock off to school.

A: And what kind of [pnom] did you guys make?

T: We made [Chikte], (A: Okay) bananas with tapioca. And this [pnom] with sticky rice ball and the beans inside.

A: Wrapped in a banana leaf?

T: No, just with sticky rice. (A: Okay) [Bonamai] makes that all the time with the sugar coconut sauce.

A: Yah, you're making me hungry now.

T: I know.

A: Did you have any employment as a youngster outside of helping your family?

T: No, I never worked at all. Even when we were in the village, and around us in a neighborhood, every, most of the people there were farmer, but we never worked. You know, our family I think was a little higher class among those people. So we, like I mentioned, my mom just cooked sweets to sell and my father was a principal. And a little like an immigration in that town. So we didn't own our land. We didn't own a house. We rented the house, but we were treated like one of them in the village.

A: Hm. Now where not here to talk all today about the war and the holocaust, but we do want to take a certain segment to discuss that and then move on from there. So what do you remember about ideas of war as a kid before the Khmer Rouge took over fully?

T: First of all I was young. Well probably old enough, but had no clue about what was going on. One day mom and dad said, just pack up as much as we can, some rice, some pots and pans, some clothes, we are going to move out. We are going to move out. And we had to rent the ox cart and with the driver to put all of our stuff and move out of our house, our village. And we had to move out. I think we were moving east, or west. Not east. Not west, but east, or south from our village. I don't remember quite well, but I had no clue what was, that the war was coming, the Pohl Pot was controlling the country, not until later. So we moved and we ended up in another village as I remember. Again, a lot of farming, small villages. And then all of a sudden we realized that we couldn't have our own kitchen, we couldn't live together. The family had to separate from each other. Mothers (--)

A: So this is when Pohl Pot had taken control?

T: That's right, yah.

A: So what village did you move to?

T: I do not remember the name, but I just remember it just, it's like Thmar Puok village. A lot of people farming, houses with stilts and grass roof. Lots of cows and dirt

pathways in the walkways, everywhere. Small houses. And we had to live in certain area in the village. In the beginning we were together, (A: Yup) but we were separated later. My father was sent to work with all the men. I was sent to work with, in my case, my age they would call me like a teenager group. My sister, she was smaller than me. She was sent to work in the child group. And other siblings, they're with my mother in the village. (A: Okay) They stayed put.

A: How about the older sibling? You were the number two, right?

T: Yah, my oldest one, I was telling, she's smaller than me, so she got to stay with the child.

A: Oh, even though she was older?

T: Even though she's older, but she's smaller. It's the physical that counted.

A: So you stayed in the same village, but you weren't living together. Did you have interaction with your parents?

T: No interaction at all. When we allowed to visit each other sometimes, we stayed together and that's it. We ate together. We didn't do anything. There's nothing to do. I think that the only interaction we had together was to find food to eat. Scavenge things in a forest. (A: Umhm) Yah, mushrooms, greens from trees, plant a little vegetable in a garden, not much because we didn't allow to have our own garden. So there's not much activities at all.

A: How did you feel about being separated from your family?

T: We couldn't complain. I couldn't complain, because every, everybody had to do it, and we had no complaint about it. I just went with the flow. Had no feelings about, oh I'm going to miss my mom. I'm going to miss my dad and my siblings. That's like there was no time to think about that. And there was no time to think that there's going to be danger ahead of you. So we just you know, we just went day to day and hour to hour.

A: Yah.

T: Had no feelings about that, about you know, what's going to happen.

A: Yah, what did you do for work during that period?

T: Um, a lot of physical. Our group, we slash and burn jungles for planting pumpkins and other vegetables, (A: Okay) and besides that, planting rice in the field. Let's see, and we just went you know, we just went place to place, moved one place to another to slash and burn, mostly slash and burn, because we are teenagers. I was a teenager in the group. So we have, they think that we have more energies. So we got to slash, and we just slash and burn, slash and burn, and then move on to another place to slash and burn.

Other people would just do the planting. And then you know, planting the rice seeds, and plants. Um, what else? Look for food for the group, and stand guard. (A: Really?) Yah. I didn't remember that I had to hold a gun to do that. (A: Huh?) I couldn't remember if I had to hold a gun, you know, when I was standing guard at our place, like a camp, but I remember we took turn standing guard.

A: And what were you guarding?

T: Just, I think, for enemies, outside, and while everybody is asleep you had to be up, awake, looking for any, you know, enemies I guess. Or maybe someone who maybe tried to leave the place when they shouldn't have to.

A: Yah. Did you go to any classes with the Khmer Rouge soldiers, or anything?

T: No, I didn't have to. I didn't have to go to attend classes, but I remember we just had meetings. Meetings about work, about where we move to. (A: Umhm) And then other time was meeting about something. I couldn't remember, but just I remember I had to sit in the big group of people and that's it. Just couldn't understand what's going on.

A: Yah.

T: Yah, and sang, and even though I couldn't remember any songs.

A: You can't remember any of the songs that you sang?

T: No. No. And for that part we never forced to like you know, memorize the songs, or, we had to sing. But I just remember that we had to work so many hours, and then had to eat together in a group. We didn't have to cook ourselves. Somebody else cooked for us.

A: Yah. Was there enough food to eat during that period?

T: It was just enough. Not, there was no leftovers, or you can't pack leftovers home. You can't cook extra somewhere else in the camp. Everything had to be in that eating common.

A: So what happened during the Khmer Rouge time for you and your family?

T: We were always separated. My mom was still in a village. I think that my older sister now, somewhere near the village. My father and I were still apart, away from the family, from the village. I didn't think that we came to visit each other very much, until my father got very sick in 19 I think '98. I had no idea why he was sick.

A: 19, 1998?

T: Ah, 1978.

A: 1978, yah.

T: Couldn't understand why he was not with us, why he was sick. I only remember that the reason he was sick, he was away from us was that he had this disease. In the village, it's like a chicken pocks. If you don't get it, you will get it. You will probably read this in George, one of George's poem called "[Yas]". So my family got it. Everybody in our family, you know, if you have a cut, you got infected. The wound got infected and there's no medicine to take care of it. And it spread all over your body, your eyes, everybody, every (--) And in the joints. Very painful, just like arthritis. But if you're older you're very susceptible to it, and the joints, you can feel more pain in the joints. Can't walk very much. You can't even cut something, like the tip of basil. You feel pain in the joints. If you are young, it's okay. You don't have that pain. So my father got it. The wound is so big there was no medication to take care of it. And plus he was, he didn't have enough to eat. And he had the edema, and his body all swelled up and maybe something else too that trigger him to just stay in bed. He couldn't walk. And all of a sudden my mother sent me a message from someone and the person said, your father is dying. You can go. I was still with the camp group. (A: Yah) They allowed me to go to visit my father at [KonKut] hospital, which is just a building.

A: What was it called?

T: It's a hospital ward. We call it a hospital ward. There was (--) A hospital ward is like a little temple building that was emptied for sick people. (A: Yah) I went there. This was in 1978. The war was almost over, you know, Pohl Pot. And he was too sick to say anything. He as waiting for us to be there so he could die. Yah, my sister came in. My sister also came to visit him at the same time as I was. My mother was there. He died a few minutes after we got there. That was that. And then I wasn't able to stay to take him, to see him buried. Someone took him right away and wasn't able to go with my mother to see where he was buried. I had to go back to the camp. My sister also. And then it was that. I went back to the camp. Till now I don't know where he's buried.

A: Yah. Do you have, at that point did you have any larger realization of what was going on to the community?

T: No. Not at all. But I just realized that, gee, this was easy. Why did they allow me to go to visit my father this easy. Yah, I couldn't understand why? Later I think this was when the Pohl Pot lost control, and everybody was allowed to go back to their original village home. My mother (--)

A: So that happened shortly after your father passed away?

T: Shortly after, Shortly after. This was probably like the end of '78 and '79.

A: Yah, and the Vietnamese invaded in (T: Yah, that's right) January, or February of '79?

T: I don't remember. I have no clue what time. There's no (--) You can't tell time there. You can't tell day, what day it is, you know, what year? There's no, there's no time. You can't tell time. You can't tell days. There's no paper and pencil so you can write down anything. So my mother was able to locate us, and I was reunited with my mother right after my father died. Now everybody was united and we stayed in that village. (A: In that village) in that village for awhile. And then my mother said, "Pack up." We had to go, to go back to old village in Thmar Puok. (A: Okay) Again we walked. This time we walked.

A: How far was it?

T: It was an all-day walk, and all-day walk. We didn't stay over in the village on our way to Thmar Puok, to our house. We came to Thmar Puok. We couldn't claim our house, our original house. My mother was able to get in touch one of her friends, and we stayed with her, not in her house, but we were able to build a little hut under a mango tree in her land, on her land. So we stayed in a little hut, all of us, eight, eight of us. (A: Wow) Yah.

A: And what did your mom do for work to get food and everything?

T: She was going with other people. Now during this time, of course Pohl Pot was not in control anymore. The Vietnamese took over, and everybody you know, was free to go back to their place, their original place. And at this time everybody is trying to get as much as they can of food. Try to get their life back to normal. That means collecting food, collecting clothes, collecting pieces to build their home. My mother was with a group of men going back and forth from the village to the Thai border, smuggling. That's when I learned the word smuggling. Smuggling in Cambodian. She went back and forth with men. She got shampoo, soap, sarong, kamar, candies, back, when she came back, she came back with those.

A: And what was she, what was she using to trade, or buy with?

T: I think it was gold.

A: And it was (--) Did she hide gold?

T: I don't know. I think she hid some gold somewhere. I couldn't remember, but she (--) Or maybe she borrowed from someone. I think she borrowed from someone, because I couldn't remember we had any gold. (A: Yah) I'm sure she borrowed from someone. She brought back stuff, especially candies so we kids could sell. I remember I was so shy selling candies in the village. (A: Why?) I never had to. I was never had to, had to you know, sell anything like candies. Yah, before Pohl Pot I remember I sold some corns and watermelon, but candies? It was so embarrassing. That was not what I was expected, but ah, I had to sell some candies. (A: Yah) So that was that. She didn't make any more desserts to sell, but having to smug was very successful for her. She was able to get some

gold to get something else, some rice, or the clothes for the kids. Yah. And she was very, she was always away from us.

A: Really?

T: Always.

A: And were you in charge of the family basically?

T: My, my oldest sister actually was in charge. And I was too. I was part of you know, charge person in the family. I, I went out a lot to look for food, to look for woods for fire, that (--)

Side A ends
Side B begins

A: Okay. So how long did you stay in that village?

T: Several months at least. Now by this time when my mother was going back and forth to village and the Thai border, I think she learned about leaving the country. That there's a way to leave the country to go to the refuge camp in Thailand. (A: Yup, yup) So one day she said, "Kids, pack again." So we all packed and we went with her. At this time the route to the, from the village to the Thai border is always with people. (A: Really?) Always with people. We're never alone. People, you see people going back and forth, back and forth, just like, like a flea market. So we were never alone. So we packed, we left the village to go to the, where she stayed when she was away from us. (A: Yup) We call that 007 Camp in the Thai border. (A: Okay) I remember that. I don't know why I remember that, but I guess it was used a lot. People used a lot to call that camp.

A: What year did you guys leave?

T: That was in 1979, in the beginning of it. Again, I don't know what month.

A: So in a way you folks were amongst the first to begin leaving?

T: I think so. I think so. There were tents everywhere. My mom never told me about her life, you know, smuggling in there with the people. You know, you never told such things. We just, we just followed her. Whatever she said we, we did, you know. We were good kids. We took care of our siblings. Now we did not have anything to do as kids there in the camp. (A: Yah) We just helped, you know, sell something. I was selling baby eggs, baby duck eggs. (A: Yah) Umhm. And my other siblings, they just hang out, they you know, hung out in the camp. They play with sticks, whatever. I couldn't remember what they were playing, but they had, they had nothing to do. I was, now I was old enough to try to smuggle, smuggle. I went with other people to the Thai village. We did this during the night, not during the day.

A: Okay. Because you weren't permitted to go visit?

T: We weren't permitted, yes. So we kind of like snuck out. But we had, our group had like a person, a guard with a gun, a guide with a gun with us. So we went. I remember the first time I went I tried to buy some eggs. Carried it back, I lost control walking and slipped off the path and fell. My eggs broke all over the place. I couldn't get anything back to mom to sell, you know, to sell. I was so disappointed. That's all I remember in that. And then one night my mom said, "You kids went to bed early. In the morning we'll get out at 12:00, midnight." She said, "Midnight. We'll leave midnight to Thai." (A: Okay) To Thailand. I couldn't sleep. I waited for the time to leave. Midnight we left the camp, the 007 Camp.

A: Okay. Now was the 007 Camp in Thailand, or in Cambodia.

T: In the border I think, but I think it's between, I think it's between, mostly I think Thai, Thai side. Okay. No, I think it's Cambodia, Cambodia side. (A: Okay) Yah. We're not yet there. My mother found a guide with a gun, and he walked us. Now it's just us. Nobody's on the road. It was very quiet. So there was eight of us and a guide. So nine of us all together. And I remember my mother gave him a necklace, a gold necklace to pay him. He walked us all the way to the Thai village, (A: Yah) and left us there. Just like left us about a few meters outside of the village. And you know, we just slept there. In the morning we walked in the village. And when we got in the village of course, you know, in this village a lot of Thai people speak Cambodian. My mother couldn't speak Thai.

A: She couldn't?

T: She couldn't. So Thai people talked to my mother and asked my mother, "Why, you know, why did you bring your children? Go back to your country. Go back to Cambodia?" At this time the police, or somebody with guns came in and they said, "Go back to Cambodia. You cannot come here to live in our country," or something like that. And I remember very clearly that my mother said, "Shoot me now if you send me to Cambodia!" And there were like five soldiers. They were soldiers. Yah. Decided not to shoot us, shoot my mom, and they walked us to a military instead.

A: Military base?

T: Military base, yah, military base in that village. And then later they transferred us to a big military base.

A: Really? How far away roughly?

T: Far. We had to (--) They, they took us on a bus.

A: Oh really?

T: A truck. (A: Okay) A truck, a little cherry truck. Just us family, eight of us. So when we got to this military base we had to stay there for I think a couple, no, just three days. It was just three days. They fed us well. I remember very clearly curry and French bread every day. It was good, except that the bread was very, very hard. Aged bread, French bread. We stayed in a tent, and later we realized that there was a family there, a Cambodian family.

A: Another family.

T: Another family. And that family and my family got to know each other. And then later they took us to this refuge camp called Mairut. No, not Mairut, oh my gosh, [Sakeo?], [Sakeo?] Camp. I was so shocked. Now we were with, we were with the other family. And the other family were, had three people, three adults. So it was eight of us and the three friends. I got there, it was like Sakeo Camp, but jeese, there were a lot of people with black clothes and short hair! It was Cambodian people, Cambodian people. There's tents and tents, rows of tents everywhere. A lot of people. A lot of people, sick people, and children without clothes. So we were dropped off by this soldier from the truck, and well we tried to find some, what's going on here. Myself now, I started to realize something, that we are not home. We are in Thailand, in Sakeo Camp, with other people. Why are we here? Tried to, started to ask questions. (A: Yah) And then we saw some American people, some white people, some workers, someone working. There's tents with doctors, and toilets. It was amazing how many people were in that camp. There were a lot of people. So finally we were able to get a tent all together. There were eleven of us, eight and the three adults that we met from the military base. We had, we had one camp for all of us. And there are other tents. I mean tents. The other tents were very, very close to us. At night people coughed, people were moaning, "Help me, help me, I can't get up!" Cough, um, that was that. It was just noise, noise everywhere. It was just too close. And that's that. My mother was able to find a job in a pharmacy. (A: Really) Yup. She knew some French. (A: Oh) She was able to get some medication for us. In this camp I remember it was raining, raining, a rainy night one night, and the person behind us, behind our tent, this person is about, I don't know, he's about forty, fifty maybe, or younger. I don't know how old he was. He was, "Help, help, help!" No one helped him. "Help, help!" I had no idea. I was a young girl. I couldn't help. (A: Yah) And then when the rain was over in the morning he was dead.

A: What happened?

T: What happened? He was sick from starvation. When he had enough food to eat he died. I guess he over ate with all other disease, you know, diseases that he had. So he died. I remember there were a lot of people carry dead people to the morgue. It was horrible, but then we were able to move away from that area just (A: Within the camp) within the camp, to a better place, a better yah.

A: And how did that happen?

T: I think when you're there for a certain time you can move out, and have a little, a better situation, a better tent. Now the other three people were still with us. We were, we were very good friends. They were very, I remember um, they were very high class people. (A: Yah, yah) And both man and woman, husband, they're a couple, and a nephew, the couple could, you know, could speak French and English.

A: They could?

T: They could. So we were good. They were working. They found some medication, some food. So we were good too to have them around. So we stuck together.

A: What was their names?

T: Their name were um, [Jamsuki, Unya Oui, Kolab, Unya Oui], and the husband, something else. I couldn't remember now, but they're in Canada. They're in Canada now.

A: Okay. So the nephew's name was?

T: Jamsuki, he's back in Cambodia working now.

A: Oh really.

T: Yah, in the government.

A: And the wife?

T: And the wife is in Cambodia, and the husband is in Cambodia now. I think they retired there. They went back from Canada. But anyway.

A: And her name was?

T: [Kolab].

A: [Kolab].

T: Yes, we call her [Ming Kolab], Aunt, Aunt [Kolab]. They were very good to us. They were like, you know, one family. But anyway, we moved to a new part of my route. Now the ration.

A: Now you were in Sakaeo?

T: We in, I'm sorry, we in Sakaeo. (A: Okay) We're in this new part of Sakaeo. Life is a little better. It's not as chaotic as the old one. It's, life was a little bit in order. You wake up in the morning, go get your food ration, come back, did nothing. Waiting until I don't know, we're just waiting. We're just there to wait for something, some miracle!

Something. And I couldn't remember. We kids didn't do anything. We just waited. And then later my mother said, "Oh we are going to move to Mairut Camp." Mairut Camp is a very good camp. It's by the ocean. (A: Okay) When we moved there the camp wasn't built yet. (A: Oh really) The camp, there was another camp that was already built, but it was occupied by people, we called them, we still call them Pohl Pot. (A: Oh really!) Yah. I don't know why, but the camp that we're suppose to be in wasn't built. We were given with bamboos and straw grass to build our own camp. And we did build. The first night we got there we slept on the sand (A: Wow) on the beach. (A: Really) But once the building, you know, just one long building with different families in the building, and again you know, all eleven of us stayed together. And better, life was better. We were given permission everyday to go to the beach. It was fun. We walked to the beach. It was fun. Everyone, you know, now people have more blood in their skin, and you know, colorful clothes. You see people. In this camp there, there were schools. There were schools for kids, for adults. And in the school I remember this very well. They were divided you know, just like in Thmar Puok school, one long building, and classes. I was in class. I took class. Sewing class, crochet. Crocheting, music class. I took guitar lessons, and never remember to play it anymore.

A: Was this American music, or?

T: American music. James Taylor. Later I realized James Taylor song.

A: So Americans teaching you at the school?

T: No, Cambodian. (A: Really?) Yup. Cambodian. Cambodian who was educated you know, back in Cambodia.

A: Before the war like.

T: Before the war, yes. And then I also took English classes. (A: Yup) But it wasn't long. We were there about a few months, and my mother, I realized that my mother found my uncle in the U.S. [Clears throat] Excuse me. And I realized that, yah, there's an opportunity for us to leave for the U.S. Um, excuse me.

A: Do you want some water?

T: That's okay. And then we went for an interview, my mother especially went for an interview. And she had a horrible time memorizing the kids' name. Kids' name, kids' age, birthdates. They never used those! My mother had to figure out in a way, because we say, you know in our culture we say, oh she's born in a rainy season, or dry seasons, and all that stuff. So she had to have someone help her figure that out. And the names. We had to use a full name. We never used a full name. We called each other by nicknames.

A: What was your nickname?

T: [Duit], for small. Um, so she had a lot to learn, just the names, the birthdates, and days, and all of that stuff. I felt so bad for her, because you know, we're kids. We couldn't help her. She had to do everything on her own.

A: Now where was your uncle?

T: My uncle was in Long Beach, California.

A: Okay.

T: Now when we, when we said, when we knew that we were sponsored by our uncle, it was not by him directly. It was by his sponsor.

A: Okay.

T: Now to change the subject, now in order for us to come to United States easier, we changed our name, talking about names, changed name, we had to change our name from our original name, to the sponsor's preferable name. With his last name. (A: Okay) So I had [Chamti] Duong. [Chamti] is from somewhere, and Duong is his last name.

A: The sponsor?

T: The sponsor.

A: Not your uncle's name.

T: No. Of course my uncle had his name too.

A: And how about your mom? Did she change her name?

T: She changed everything. All of us are Duong, D U O N G. I still had no clue why my mother had to do that until later. It's like oh, Duong! We are Loeung. We couldn't complain, because we wanted to come to the United States, (A: Yah) especially my mother. Us kids, we had no, we just, we were good kids. We were good kids. We just did whatever she said to us.

A: So when did you leave the camp?

T: We left Mairut Camp in 1981.

A: So you were in the camps for two years or more, between the different camps?

T: Two years, even though it seemed very short. It was so chaotic there. In Mairut we left in 1981.

A: Yah, and you went right to Long Beach?

T: No. We went to the Philippines. (A: Okay) We went to the Philippines, and they said, "Oh, you got to go and study English." You got to go and study how ways of life here, the American culture. So they took us to the Philippines. And again it was much, much better. Now at this time we separated from our friends. They, they were able to leave to Canada before we left for the U.S. (A: Okay) So it was just eight of us. So we went to the Philippines. We stayed there for three months to learn English. I was very mature now. I was able to get a job. I worked in a dental office helping dentist. Interpret a little bit, because I knew some English. Very proud of myself. I danced. And then this opportunity (--) Let's see, I forgot to tell you too. In Mairut Camp I was able to take dance classes.

A: Okay, who was teaching those?

T: I have no, no idea.

A: And it was Cambodian dance?

T: Cambodian dance, mostly folk, folk dance. Yah, I was so glad that there was a dance class. It's like I went right away when I heard about it. I asked my mom, and my mom allowed me to go. I learned the coconut shell dance. That was that. We didn't stay long. So I didn't learn anything else, just the coconut shell dance. In the Philippines I didn't dance, but I would just learn English. Took English classes, and interpret at the dentist office.

A: And what was the place that you were staying at in the Philippines? What was that called?

T: It's called the Philippines Refugee Processing Center.

A: Do you know where it was? Like on what Island?

T: Oh, it's in the island called [Marong, Marong Bataan]. There was also the American Base in there too, in [Bataan].

A: Oh, and that's how it's pronounced, Bataan? (T: Umhm) Because you know, (T: Bataan) Bataan death march.

T: Yah, yah, that's right.

A: So it's really Bataan.

T: Umhm, yah.

A: That's good to know. I should have figured that out, because there were two a's in it.

T: Two a's, Bataan. So we stayed there, and we had good food ration. I remember we had this big baked banana ration. Everyday we had bananas. We were sick of eating banana. [Both chuckle] That was unbelievable, banana was everywhere! And we were so, you know, we were so, we had a lot of freedom. We went out. We went out with our teachers to the Manilla, (A: Really) the capitol city of the Philippines.

A: Now was that the first city you had been to in your whole life? You had never gone to Phnom Penh (T: Yes, never) since you were a baby.

T: Never. So it was, it was the first city.

A: And what did you think? Do you remember?

T: Um, I don't remember at all. It just you know, we just stayed with one of the teachers. And our home, it was just a lot of people. You know the city was very free. Modern like I used to see on TV, on, when we were in my Sakao Camp we were able to see the movies, American movies. So it was like, oh, that's [unclear].

A: Do you remember which movies you saw?

T: Um, Mark, not Mark Twain. What is the guy? Ah, Douglas.

A: Kirk Douglas?

T: Kirk Douglas. Kirk Douglas in some sort of western movies with lots of guns. [Both laugh] I can remember that, Kirk Douglas! Yes! Yah. It was fun seeing in a big screen outside, just like it used to be in Thmar Puok. We you know, we had outdoor theater, which is fun. Anyway.

A: So you stayed three months in the Philippines.

T: And so now we completed our, our classes, you know. We graduated. We had parties, and we went (--) We came to Long Beach where my uncle is. Came here and he said, "Oh my gosh!" His wife made us noodles, [unclear], noodles with the sauce. I say, "Gees, how did you do it?" In our country it took days to make [unclear]. And she showed us the package. Oh that's how. Just boil water and put the dry one in. It's like spaghetti. I said, "Oh, that's how you made it, huh!" We crammed into this small apartment.

A: What street were you living on?

T: Cherry Avenue.

A: Oh, that's a big street.

T: Oh, big street, big tall buildings and lots of people! My goodness. But it was dirty though. I realized it was dirty.

A: Really, the house?

T: Yah.

A: The neighborhood, or?

T: In the neighborhood, yes. The house was okay. We are very clean people, yah, but the apartment was very small. Decent apartment, two bedrooms, small kitchen, small living room. My mother always slept in the living room on a couch until she died. Yah, always, always slept on a couch. Three girls took one room, and the boys took one room. And my uncle had the opposite apartment adjacent to us. Fine, you know. During that time I didn't worry anything at all. Nothing to worry about. I just registered to go to school. I, that's my responsibility. Just went to school.

A: Did you go to like a public school adult ed, or?

T: I went to high school, public high school. (A: Okay) By now I was close to eighteen years old. (A: Right) I didn't realize that if you are eighteen years old you have to leave high school and go somewhere else. So I went to the high school for one year. (A: Okay) And I had to leave because I was eighteen years old.

A: And did you take English as a second language courses, or just regular courses?

T: I was, I took ESL at the high school, but then later the teachers said that, "Oh you had enough English, and you can take you know, integrated class." So I (--)

Tape I, side B ends

Tape II, side A begins

A: So you were talking about you went to school (T: went to school), and you went to an integrated class.

T: Yah. The school is called the Milliken High School in Long Beach. It was fun. I still remember how my ESL teacher looks like. She was very tall. Older though, in her 50s. But anyway um, in 1983 I left Milliken High School to the Adult Ed. Adult Education at the Wilson High School at night. Again I still um, took some integrated classes. And I went there for, for two years to finish my GED. (A: Umhm) Yah, at night. Now during this time in the day I took nursing class.

A: Oh really!

T: Yes, nurse's aide. So I finished that and I had a job working as nurse's aide. (A: At a?) My first job. In Long Beach.

A: A doctor, dentist office or?

T: No, at the nurses' home, nursing home. Belvista Nursing Home. It's still there.

A: Belvista?

T: Yah, Belvista. It's still there. So I, what was that? What was the salary? \$4.50 I think, an hour. And I took a third shift job working from 11:00 till morning, 7:00. Yah. I was a good daughter. When I got my first pay check I gave it to my mother. It wasn't much. \$80.00 or something like that, first check I gave to mom. And I was always a good daughter, gave her all the money I worked, from my work. And then after that I, you know, after the (--) I took courses as nursing. I said, "gee, maybe I you know, can go nursing, go continue to be a nurse. But then I met some group, met a group of girls you know, college friends, and they were learning to be business. So you know. So I said, gees, maybe I can you know, take more English classes so I can be better with you know, English and take business classes. But as I took one, one business class. It was like telephone communication. (A: Yup) And you had to speak, speak to an operator. It's just a similar kind of thing. And you have to be able to understand the operator. It's like you know, telephone operator. I was that, yah. So I tried to understand people talking. All of sudden and I realize that gees, my English was not enough for this class. So I quit, but my typing class was good. I was good at typing. I can type very fast. I was very, very good. But then I decided I will need to take more English classes. College classes are so, so hard for me by this time. So I decided not to take anything but English classes. I took reading, writing, comprehension, and all of that stuff. And I took you know, I had English lab. So just English classes. (A: Umhm) Now by this time my sister got married. My older sister got married and she moved here, east, to Massachusetts, Lowell, Massachusetts.

A: And how did she meet her husband?

T: She met him in Long Beach. He actually moved to Lowell first. Got a job working at the CMAA. (A: Really?) Good salary, you know, \$7.50, it was very good, an hour. So a year later my sister moved with a daughter. Her daughter was a year old. And then my sister said to me, "Move here. You can go to work and you can go to school here?" So I listened to her. Well you know, \$7.50 an hour is a very good salary. (A: Umhm) So I moved. My mother agreed that I could move. I was very, very broke after I moved here. Didn't have any money.

A: Yah. You were living with your sister and brother-in-law.

T: Still living with, yes, yes, I was still living with my sister and my brother-in-law, with my niece Katherine.

A: And where did they move to?

T: They moved to Greendale Street in Lowell. (A: Yup) Living, sharing and apartment with another family. We were cramped in there. Oh it was so awful. It was cold. We moved in, I moved in September or so.

A: Of what year?

T: Of 1984. 1984. And then I found a job at CMAA working as a housing counselor, find people jobs, I mean houses. \$7.00, yah, \$7.50 was a very good salary.

A: And this was when CMAA was on Perry Street?

T: No. CMAA was on High Street.

A: Okay, at the International Institute?

T: Yes, that was it. Um, it was good! Um, I enjoy working. I was very proud of myself that I was able to you know, speak enough English to communicate with people, with American people here. I think that Lowell people welcomed me here, and I felt very secure, safe, both Cambodian and you know, American people. Small, and less hectic, less chaotic.

A: Than Long Beach?

T: Than Long Beach. Long Beach was very crowd. I remember just too many people. I, I did not have any connection with community, with people there. I only went to school, to school, to school, to work. And here I was able to go to a theater, working with people, with Cambodian people, in which I never had before in Long Beach. So I was, I felt great. Um.

A: Now did you guys do cultural stuff at CMAA on High Street?

T: Um, on High Street? I can't remember we did anything. As I remember I didn't help anything at all, any cultural thing at all. There were English classes there, and of course the dance. During this time the Angkor Dance Troupe was, was just, it was just a group of people getting together. And they found High Street, you know, big space. The first floor was huge and we were able to, they were able to practice dance. And that's when I found out that, that anybody welcome, anybody you know, welcome to take dance classes. And I, I went there and I got to practice the dance. It's like oh my gosh! This is unbelievable!

A: You enjoyed that. (T: Yah!) You still had that interest from when you were younger.

T: When I was in Long Beach I was also in a class, a dance.

A: Oh, they had one there.

T: A dance troupe there.

A: Tell us about that.

T: I didn't, like I say, I didn't have good connection. I went to practice, and I learned a lot of Folk Dance, Coconut Shell dance, and the Pastel Dance. (A: And who was?) I don't remember her name.

A: Who was offering the classes?

T: It's a Cambodian, Cambodian woman. She's um, she said she used to dance in Cambodia. I don't know that much. I doubted that she (--) I don't know at all. I don't know her well at all.

A: Do you remember her name?

T: I don't remember her name?

A: And where were the classes held?

T: It was held in Long Beach, I think in one of the buildings. I couldn't remember well. I just remember we went to performances. We had a lot of performances. It's just that I didn't deal with her closely. I remember we dance in Queen Mary. We danced in one of the movies. Someone filmed us in a movie. (A: Really?) Um, we went everywhere, at school, we had a lot of performances. I just did a lot of Folk Dances, Coconut Shell, and Pastel Dance was my favorite dances. Yah. Anyway, back in Lowell by this time George and I met. And I was intense and practicing the dance with the Troupe. As this time there was no formal costume. We just came to practice mostly Folk Dances, the Coconut Shell Dance, Pastel, and the Fishing Dance. (A: Yah) I remember that back you know, twenty years ago. You know, everybody practiced in their regular clothes. It was kind of funny. And I mean I never had to dress, get dressed in a, you know, formal dancing costume and to practice. [Speaks in Khmer] Back in Cambodia when I was in school we just danced with our regular clothes because we were students. We didn't have extra clothes to wear for dancing.

A: Did you dance in the village before you went to Thailand?

T: No.

A: No. Okay.

T: No. Only the time that we were in school, I was in school. Never had to dance during the Pohl Pot time.

A: Or before that?

T: Or before that, yah. Never at all. So dancing with [Khmer words] during practice. I had the first experience was in the, at Jacob's Pillow (M: Okay) in the 90s when they got some funds, the Jacob's Pillow got some funds and they sponsored us to go there. That was my first [Khmer words], and then the classical lessons for the first time.

A: So Jacob's Pillow gave the dance troupe the funds to get outfitted?

T: Um, we, I think we (--) No, I don't think they gave us money for the outfits. We found, we were actually, we found ourselves those. (A: Okay) At this time Tim Tou, our Director, he had an Angkor Dance Troupe, knew, well he knew because he had his aunt you know, danced, was a dancer and she worked in a palace and dance costumes. So he knew, I think that he knew that there's [Khmer word] involved, and of course at Jacob's Pillow, the first time, dance masters all, you know, when they practiced they practiced in [Khmer word]. So we were prepared. We were told that we need, the students that are involving in the workshop had to wear [Khmer word]. So we, we got ourselves some. The first one I just bought t-shirt, tight t-shirt. That was that, until later we got some dance master to make us some [Khmer word].

A: So when you folks from Lowell went to Jacob's Pillow there was dance masters from Cambodia, or?

T: From, no, not from Cambodia. Um, they were from Maryland. They were from Connecticut. [Netgru Sakuen] was from Connecticut. [Netgru Sumali ?] was from I think Maryland, and others. So from the area. So we had a good time. We were glad that we would, we had the opportunity to go to Jacob's Pillow, dance with the real dance masters. Yah. Live music. That was, that was a dance palace for me and for other people, but it was really good. I was very proud to be part of it too.

A: Tell us some other stories of kind of the early days of the dance troupe.

T: Um, Tim Tou, and another guy, one other co-founder, Ra.

A: What's his name?

T: Ra, R A. Ra [Chea]. Ra was kind of like a business guy. (A: Okay) He's the one who like booked the troupe to go place. (A: Ah huh. Ah huh) And in the early year students never, students didn't get you know, pay like the way we do now. (A: Umhm) It was always from the pocket, from Ra's pocket. It was like a bribe. Here's some money. You take this and come back next time to practice. That kind of thing. It was never a check of anything, a formal. Twenty dollars I remember him actually, you know, got the money from his pocket and gave it to me. Here's twenty dollars for gas, because during that time I was living far away. George and I were living in Millis Falls, or somewhere, in Chelmsford. And here's the money for gas, and that's twenty dollars a week. They were very close, small, small group. We had practice I think after, after the

High Street, at the CMAA. We moved to, excuse me, I don't remember now. Too far away.

A: To Perry Street CMAA?

T: I don't think (--) You know after the High Street I went away to the Philippines to work with George at [unclear] for two years. (A: Okay) Came back. I don't think that the Angkor Dance Troupe had ever practiced at CMAA on Perry Street. Yes, I remember we came to one of the buildings, the National Park, where the wheel is? Close to the Revolving Museum, across from that.

A: Yah, the Mack Building.

T: The Mack Building, where now they have their train exhibit.

A: Yup, yup, the Trolley Exhibit.

T: The Trolley, yes. Excuse me [clears throat]. So we, we were up, upstairs at the top floor.

A: And that was the practice space?

T: That was the practice space.

A: Ha, okay.

T: And I, I think that we, we got that for free too. We didn't have to pay. And then I just remembered after that the dance troupe moved to the CMAA on Jackson Street. (A: Okay) Yes.

A: And then there was also at the Charter School on Jackson Street.

T: That's right. After, after CMAA we went to Charter School, yes.

A: Why did the, why did the troupe move over to the Charter School? Do you know?

T: I don't know. It's probably the contract there, or the safety, yes. I'm not sure what happened.

A: Where else did you perform around?

T: Performance around here in Massachusetts, went to the Boston Library. (A: Uh huh) First Night in Boston two times. (A: Really) Yes. Schools. A lot of places.

A: Did you guys travel far out of New England to perform?

T: My memory is gone now. I can't remember. Of course at Jacob's Pillow. That was good. Yes. Um, Rhode Island, Connecticut. There were so many places I can't remember.

A: How has the troupe changed over the last twenty years?

T: Oh, well change. Well of course you know, we are, the formal I would say, formal, official I have to say, dance troupe, and the change is that we are officially recognized by people in a city, and outside the city. That's the big change I have to say. We are not just, always just a dance troupe, like twenty years ago when Ra used to give me twenty dollars for gas. Something like that.

A: And there were other dance troupes around over the last twenty years that have come and gone?

T: Only the CMAA I think. I don't know other dance troupe in the area, in this, in Massachusetts.

A: Okay.

T: Um, [Netgru Sakuen] and [Name unclear], her name is [Name unclear] not Sakuen. In Connecticut she used to have a troupe, but then it was separated not long after she developed it. And that's all. I don't know besides the CMAA. There's no other troupe. Yah.

A: So any other stories you want to share with us today?

T: No. I don't have anything.

A: What did you folks do when you went to the Philippines? Back to the Philippines?

T: George was trying to get a job through the Peace Corps. And then, and then it turned out that there's a job in the Philippines, not through Peace Corps, through something, something else. As you see I forgot what it is now. But he got a job as curriculum developer for I think it was Cultural Class, American Cultural Class, or something like that, or language class.

A: And you were helping teach Khmer people?

T: I didn't help. No, I was there as a spouse, but I got a job later working in elementary education through this agency. I forgot now, but one of the education, educational agency, World Vision. I was teaching English to little kids, eight, six, seven year old kids.

A: Cambodians, or?

T: Cambodian, Vietnamese, everybody, Laos.

A: In Camps?

T: In the camp, yah.

A: What was the name of the camp that you were at? You weren't at (--)

T: That's the Philippines Processing Center.

A: That same place that you had gone through?

T: Same place that I was in.

A: Wow.

T: Yah, so that was, that was one interesting thing about that trip. And I took George to the village that I was in, and places were still the same five years after.

A: What years were you there again?

T: I was there in 1981, yah, and 1985 I went back. Yah. 1980, 1986 I went back.

A: For two years?

T: For two years, and I was able to meet my old worker, a couple of them. That's interesting.

A: What's your thoughts about Lowell, Massachusetts?

T: I think Lowell is a very, very peaceful place for me I have to say. Like I said, I have, I have more connection with people here than in Long Beach, California. And I like the four seasons. The changes in seasons here. There are a lot of people all coming together. You know, we have activities. The Cambodians have their own New Years. And African American people have their own things. Even though we individually have it, but it is very interesting, and I like to see this, this, that because I mean Lowell gives the opportunity for individual ethnic group to enjoy, to celebrate, to hold on to their heritage. That's, I think that's a good thing about Lowell for me. I'm saying it from my heart.

A: Okay, thank you very much Thida.

T: You're welcome Ali.

End of Interview